DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 308 194 SP 031 552

AUTHOR McKenzie, Floretta Dukes
TITLE The Future Direction of Regional Educational Laboratories in Contributing to Urban School Improvement. Laboratory Policy Paper.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Feb 89
NOTE 13p.; For other documents related to the Regional Educational Laboratory recompetition of 1990, see SP 031 546-556.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Community Support; Economic Factors; *Educational Cooperation; Elementary Secondary Education; High Risk Students; *Networks; *Research and Development Centers; *Research Utilization; *School Effectiveness; *Urban Education
IDENTIFIERS *Regional Educational Laboratories

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the current and future roles of organizations such as education laboratories in serving the changing needs of urban education. Concerns for greater effectiveness in support services stem from the growing need to effectively deal with some of the complex, lingering issues which to data have been only marginally addressed. Urban schools are increasingly becoming schools for the poor, and all institutions concerned with improvement of urban education must work toward increasing community support for these schools and help find ways to attract and retain the participation of middle and upper class families. While some progress has been made in improving basic skills in urban schools, curricular and instructional approaches are needed that will develop higher order problem-solving and critical thinking skills. Research and development is also needed on early identification of students who are at risk of failure and dropping out. Good teachers are of crucial importance, and a closer collaboration is needed between preservice training institutions, regional labs, and urban school districts. To improve urban schools, the network of education research and development institutions must work closely together in developing new knowledge and in the strategic application of that knowledge for program improvement. (JD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED308194

LABORATORY POLICY PAPER

THE FUTURE DIRECTION OF REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORIES IN CONTRIBUTING TO URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Floretta Dukes McKenzie

President, The McKenzie Group
Washington, D.C.
(Formerly Superintendent of Schools and
Chief State School Officer
District of Columbia Public Schools)

February 1989

This is one of several papers about the regional laboratory program, or functions which laboratories perform, which the Office of Educational Improvement (OERI) in the U.S. Department of Education has commissioned. The purpose of the papers is to assist planning for the 1990 recompetition of awards to operate regional laboratories. This paper has been written under contract to the U.S. Department of Education. No endorsement by OERI or the Department of Education should be inferred.

SP 031 552

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Future Direction of Regional Education Laboratories in Contributing to Urban School Improvement

The assessment of any institution serving urban schools must reflect the condition and changing needs of urban education. This paper examines the current and future roles of supporting organizations such as education laboratories given the progress and problems of the school systems they are designed to serve. In doing so, the paper is intended to offer observations and suggestions to improve the service of these support organizations in the future.

Regional education laboratories have been a part of the education landscape for a considerable period of time. In this time they have made significant contributions to the improvement of education. Their major contribution has been the introduction of research and development practices and information which have enhanced state and local problem-solving capacities. Labs have been able to publish research and development reports on all aspects of educational improvement and have disseminated these documents quite widely both within their regions and nationally. Labs also have conducted significant research that has contributed to the overall knowledge base about teaching and learning.

A principal strength of education laboratories is in the education research and development network of which they are a part. The extent to which labs utilize this network to strengthen their capacity to serve schools must be primary to their assessment. The basic design of the education labs and centers was based on the belief that state-of-the-art research knowledge was essential to improvement of education practice. The division of labor between labs and centers was that university-based centers would specialize in "knowledge production" and the labs would focus on "knowledge application." What has transpired over the years, however, is that labs have become more autonomous and interaction between education labs and centers has not increased as was once hoped.

Several factors have contributed to this lack of interaction. OERI, itself has contributed by setting-up an environment of competition between the labs and centers that has worked against fostering interaction. At times the agency has shown a definite preference for the work of research centers over that of labs. Attempts, for

example have been made to modify the allocation of resources between labs and centers that would have significantly impacted lab funding. The labs responded to the threat of reduced funding through political action. The result while successful for labs resulted in an environment of mistrust not only for the agency but also for the centers themselves that were now seen as competitors rather then colleagues. The current make-up or the lab and center advocate organization, CEDaR is a testament to this fracture in relationship. Most of the centers are no longer active members in this organization.

The absence of effective interaction within the lab and center network has resulted in considerable unevenness in the services labs provide as well as in the labs' overall capacity to represent the best and most current research knowledge available for problem resolution. This isn't to say that labs, as we have seen, have not made contributions both in the development of knowledge and the application of that knowledge to solving problems. The concern raised here is that labs have been less efficient and have been diminished in their capacity to contribute to local problem-solving because of their increased isolation from research centers and the research community in general; except in areas that are compatible with their own research interests. For years labs hired their own researchers almost in competition with research centers. The argument put forward was that labs required their own research capacity to be responsive to the needs of their regions. Current concerns for greater effectiveness in the support services from education laboratories to urban school districts is now more important then ever stems from the growing need, particularly of urban school systems, to effectively deal with some of the complex, lingering issues which to date, have only been marginally addressed.

As will be seen from the following, the needs or urban schools are so pervasive and pressing that a coordinated approach to solving these problems, at a level that makes a difference, and that is the classroom, must become an operational reality.

Present and Future Needs of Urban Schools

Urban Schools as Schools for the Poor

Our urban schools are increasingly becoming schools for the poor. In addition to doing a better job of educating students from poor families, we also need to reestablish public education as the universal educational institution for all of our young people. At

the same time we have been integrating schools racially, they have become more segregated economically. This segregation erodes the local economic base for urban schools as well as the role of public schools as the primary educational institution for all students, with or without financial means. All institutions concerned with improvement of urban education must work toward increasing community support for these public schools and help find ways to attract and retain the participation of middle and upper class families.

Student Achievement Beyond the Basics

Student achievement remains the primary concern of urban schools. Though we have made some progress in improving basic skills, the ability of students to organize this information and use it effectively to solve problems is severely limited. Though this is a general problem in all school systems and at all levels of education, it is most severe in urban schools. This is the primary reason for the dramatic decline in standardized test scores at the secondary level and why urban school students do so poorly on SAT's. The problems students are having in academic performance are directly attributable to the quality of instruction they are receiving. Specifically, urban schools need curricular and instructional approaches that will enable students to develop higher order problem-solving and critical thinking skills.

This particular need provides a good example of how a critical concern of urban schools has not been adequately addressed, partially due to the lack of an effective research into practice network. School systems need help from cognitive research in understanding: the learning problems their students are having; what instructional strategies work; and how these strategies can be tailored to particular learning styles. We not only need to know what strategies work, but also need help in figuring out how to effectively transfer this knowledge through staff development to curriculum developers, instructional supervisors and teachers. Though these concerns may appear obvious, the answers remain perplexing and, as yet, urban schools have received only limited help from external support agencies in resolving them.

Related to the above is the need for urban schools to expand the capacity of urban educators to use technology as an aid in teaching higher order problem-solving skills as well as enabling students themselves to use technology directly in their information organizing and problem-solving pursuits. The research and development to

develop more effective and integrated computer assisted instruction would be particularly valuable to urban settings. Here is a perfect example of missed opportunity. Both the Harvard Center on Technology and the Northwest Lab have done extensive work, one on education technology development and the other on technology evaluation and application. We all should be benefiting extensively from this work. Urban schools instead are still fumbling along, generally behind the state of the art in both research and practice in the use of technology to improve instruction.

Students At Risk

Although "students at risk" is a currently popular and overworked phrase, we still know very little about these students and how to be most helpful to them. We need from the research and development community better and earlier identification procedures for students who are at risk of school failure and dropping out. We also need better monitoring systems for these students to determine the effectiveness of efforts on their behalf. Instead of blaming some external forces for the problems students have in school, what is needed is a better understanding of how the conditions these students face affect their ability to engage in the educational process and of the ways in which that educational process contributes to students' engagement problems.

Further, we need research and development studies of students with high levels of risk factors who are able to be successful despite an array of adverse conditions. From such research, we may be able to learn how to help students survive a hostile environment. In line with this type of approach, we need to look at the qualities and characteristics of programs that are successful with various kinds of high risk students to determine the factors that work to engage these students and keep them in school. We already know from the literature and direct experience that school failure and truancy are two prominent risk factors for urban students. We need to discover more effective ways to get students to attend school regularly and to provide them with the support systems they require to stay in school.

School systems need to reexamine where the student fits into the priorities of the instructional programs. A significant risk factor for many students may be the indifference or negative reactions of teachers and administrators to students who do not meet their expectations. Many students who drop out of school feel as if everyone was a bit happier when they left.

Teacher Training, Retraining and In-Service

One of the most critical issues for urban school districts is the need for well-trained teachers who know how to teach in urban classrooms and who are committed to all of the students they serve. The current pool of teaching graduates are not prepared to teach in urban schools because they are not grounded in the needs and conditions of urban schools, nor are they sufficiently acculturated to the urban school environment which would be helpful in the adjustment process of new teachers. New teachers are also not provided the tools they need to work effectively in the urban school environment giving rise to considerable frustration and feelings of incompetence. Understandably, the attrition rates among new teacher are quite high and combined with the low numbers of recent graduates willing to teach in the central cities, a real threat to urban education emerges. An important step in meeting the need for teachers well prepared to teach in urban schools is to forge a closer collaboration between pre-service teacher training institutions, educational support organizations such as regional labs, and urban school districts.

Staff development is a critical need for urban districts. We need to develop, in conjunction with teacher education professionals, intensive sustained retraining programs for existing staff. Many of our experienced teachers receive little, if any, assistance in adapting to their changing student populations and therefore, have difficulty in meeting their students' learning needs. Urban students represent increasingly diverse cultures, language and personal orientations. The growing numbers of Limited English Proficient (LEP) children in our nation's schools pose additional challenges for urban teachers. The current pre- and in-service teacher training programs are not adequately preparing our teachers to meet the instructional and support needs of language minority students, many of whom drop out of school or fail to fully develop their capacities.

Additionally, principals in urban districts need significant retraining. They must become effective instructional leaders who can guide and support their faculties in meeting the array of instructional challenges confronting today's schools. Research has shown the pivotal role the principal plays in developing effective schools. Further development is needed in translating this research into specific training and re-training programs on instructional leadership relevant to principals in the urban environment.

Linking and Integrating Social Services to Meet the Needs of Urban Youngsters

Because of the growing numbers of poor urban school youngsters, the school is increasingly required to be an advocate to ensure students are receiving a range of needed community and social services. Often these services are essential to students' well being and in turn, their ability to apply themselves to their school work.

Although many cities have significantly improved municipal health and social services, most cities lack an integrated, comprehensive approach for delivering such services to vulnerable or needy students and their families. Greater coordination of services and providing these services in the school should be considered whenever possible. More creative and effective models for the coordination and delivery of social, psychological and health services need to be developed.

Future Roles of Regional Labs

Many of the priority concerns expressed above are not new. They are lingering concerns which still lack clarity, understanding and solutions. Unfortunately, the longer such problems persist, the more intransigent they become. In the following section, suggestions are offered regarding the role education laboratories could play in attacking these persistent problems.

Gaining Power Through Closer Ties with the Research and Development Network

The problems described above are quite complex and multidimensional. Solutions will require the acquisition of knowledge through research; the understanding of how these problems affect and are addressed by school systems; the development of mechanisms to improve the structure and functioning of education institutions. In other words, there is plenty of work for all aspects of the research and development network. We have tried the redundant regional lab model, that is, a regional entrepreneurial lab for "all seasons and reasons." The fact is that while regional differences do exist and labs should address these different needs, the problems we face in educating our students have great similarities from one region to the next. By recognizing these commonalities and engaging them in a coordinated manner, the research centers and education laboratories in combination with other institutions with similar interests can provide a formidable capacity no single set or subset of research and development agencies could duplicate. An integrated R&D agenda for labs and centers that focuses on a set of major problems should be developed. The specialized centers should be

providing much of the knowledge base required by labs to, in turn, meet the improvement needs of school districts within their region. Frequent meetings and reviews of progress in meeting a set of R&D objectives should be held between all labs and center programs to reassess their contributions and make changes where required.

In no way should this increased collaborative capacity be interpreted as infringing on the ability of labs to work effectively in their regions. It should be clear from the forgoing, that the capacity of both labs and centers are limited in their ability to effectively address the education needs of urban eduction centers and that planful collaboration is essential in not only building the overall capacity of the research and development network but also the individual capacity of each member of that network.

Emphasize Technical Assistance Problem-Solving Role

Regional labs should offer more hands-on sustained technical assistance to all urban school districts within their region. At present, much of the direct help to schools is provided on a fee-for-service basis, unless the requested assistance is a part of a lab's pre-set research and development program. It would even be conceivable for each lab to station some staff members in local school systems who would offer direct assistance as well as mobilize overall lab involvement when appropriate.

The primary function of this direct help to urban districts would be to translate state-of-the-art research into actions and plans for program improvement. This approach would allow labs and their personnel to provide a sustained problem-solving effort over time. From such efforts, the labs would gain a first-hand understanding of the usefulness and effectiveness of research as a vehicle for improvement of practice. This approach would have the further advantage of providing labs more specific knowledge about school districts' capacities and the particular ways in which labs can be most helpful to schools in their program improvement endeavors.

It is recognized that this approach runs somewhat counter to the current policies and practices for labs. It must be emphasized however, that while providing assistance through state agencies may be more efficient, the resultant effect is likely to continue to be inadequate given the extent of problems in urban schools. Given limited resources labs should initially work with urban systems needing the greatest help. State agencies should continue to provide whatever assistance they can along with the coordinated lab

effort. State agencies can also be helpful in applying the knowledge gained in what proves to work in one urban setting to others needing similar assistance. In other words state agencies must continue to be an important part of the overall collaborative effort to improve the capacity of urban schools.

Building School System Capacity

Another important role for the labs is to provide more ongoing technical assistance to enable urban school districts to conduct their own applied research. Urban school systems also need technical assistance from labs in conducting meaningful planning, using forecasting and strategic planning approaches. Labs can aid such planning efforts by providing research and analysis used in dealing with similar situations in other school districts.

Program decision makers need training on how to systematically use planning and research efforts as an aid in reviewing programs and making allocations. A further capacity that needs to be developed to aid the planning and decision-making process is the development of program evaluation capacities at the local level. A critical need among urban school districts is to develop an in-house ability to conduct formative evaluation of programs and services.

Capacity building through technical assistance also is needed in developing the next generation of comprehensive K-12 curricula and instructional systems. This would require a heavy emphasis on working in school districts to expand their capabilities to carry on continuous curriculum improvement efforts on their own. The next generation of curriculum and instructional systems will have to be more responsive to the diverse learning styles of the mix of urban students and will have to address the critical need to increase students' higher order skill development particularly in the areas of problem solving and critical thinking.

Developing More Effective Pre-Service and In-Service Training for Teachers

Another crucial role for the labs is to translate the research on effective teaching in urban settings into actual training modules for teachers in training as well as for teachers needing retraining.

Labs need to become a part of efforts designed to forge linkages between teacher training institutions and urban school districts. Labs should provide technical assistance to universities in planning joint projects with urban school districts designed to improve the instructional skills of new as well as existing teachers. Labs should provide the leadership in their regions to convene teacher training experts and leaders of urban districts to help assess needs and to examine existing programs that show promise and on the basis of the foregoing analysis, develop improved programs.

Work on Developing Effective Central Office and School Management and Organization Structures

Currently, there is significant interest in large urban districts in restructuring and developing a more effective central office. Labs can play an important role in providing the research and experience base to school systems that would help them design and bring about these organizational changes in ways that would meet their needs and be more effective in solving their organizational problems.

The need for more responsive and more efficient management structures provides the opportunity for education laboratories to provide direct technical hands-on assistance to school districts in developing their restructuring plans as well as providing formative evaluation guidance in assessing the effectiveness of these plans over time. Feedback of this kind will be extremely important in facilitating these important organizational changes.

Another area in which lab assistance could be helpful is in the examination of court involvement in the management of desegregation programs. A systematic inquiry into this area could help to inform courts and school districts of the potential effects of court-mandated actions and allocations of school district resources based on experience and accumulated wisdom. These inquiries should also assess more effectively the educational gains students make as a result of the implementation of different plans.

Linking Urban School Districts With Other Community Agencies Supplying Support Services to Students and Families

Education labs should also take the initiative in convening school district and political leaders of cities and regions to explore effective ways of reconfiguring support service delivery to high risk students, dropouts, teenage mothers and youngsters living

in extreme poverty or under extremely adverse conditions. The coordinated delivery of support services to students is not only critical to their welfare but to their ability for school success. Labs could work with education research centers to commission action research to study the intermediate and long-term effects of various strategies for integrating the delivery of social and educational services.

Conclusions

The challenge for urban public schools from this point to the twenty-first century will be to demonstrate their ability to provide the best education for all children. If schools fall very short of this goal, the nation will come to depend less on public education and increasingly will be receptive to alternatives which may not share the commitment to providing quality educational opportunities for each child regardless of economic circumstance. We have worked too hard and invested too much in the concept of high quality universal public education to allow the demise of this noble experiment in democracy. This failure would have grave consequences for the principles of equality and equity which we have honored as a nation for so long.

Education labs, as described here, have an important role to play in the improvement of urban schools. To do this, however, the network of education research and development institutions must work closely together to forge a more purposeful and strategic force to help bring about needed changes. Through the concerted development of new knowledge and the strategic application of that knowledge for program improvement, the contributions of this research and development network could be very significant.

With bold new initiatives that combine to strengthen the delivery of effective instructional services, urban students will acquire the skills necessary to meet the competitive challenges that await them. Provided with opportunities to employ their skills, urban youngsters will be able to take the forward steps that this nation has grown to expect from each succeeding generation.

Although the challenges are great, all concerned must assist in the renewal of our urban public schools. We must develop a positive, creative force in our schools, approaches to address problems realistically and improvement strategies based on research and experience that will produce not minimally but maximally effective schools.

Excellent public schools are a realistic goal for every community. Meeting that goal, however, will require the determination and assistance of many parties. The regional labs and centers can play a major role in realizing this most worthy objective.